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ABSTRACT

A comparison of German and American advertising reveals differences in technique and structures. Persuasion is central in both, but the grammatical structures and illocutionary devices available in each language vary. The culture is also reflected in the type and degree to which each language uses techniques of persuasive language. The findings can be applied in the foreign language classroom, allowing students to better understand German marketing techniques, German verbal and nonverbal communication, the function of German strategies and structures used for persuading, and perceived and actual cultural differences. Comparison of automobile ads from the two countries, using both pictures and text, suggests significantly different approaches to the audience, with the German version using a much more interpersonal communication style and the American ad stressing facts. The level of communication in the ads also varies. The German ad uses conversational turn-taking, handwriting, more personal pronouns, and an identification of buyer and seller belonging to the same group. The American ad is clearly constructed as a monologue, focusing on the product alone. The ads are appended. (MSE)

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THE LANGUAGE-CULTURE INTERFACE IN GERMANY ADVERTISEMENTS

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The Language-Culture Interface in German Advertisements

German and English advertising utilize different techniques and structures. Persuasion is the constitutive element in both, yet the grammatical structures and illocutionary devices available to each language are different. In the type and the degree to which each language employs techniques of persuasive language, we also find reflections of the culture. These findings can be applied in the Foreign Language classroom, allowing American students to learn about:

- German Marketing techniques
- German verbal and nonverbal communication (video)
- the function of German structures used for persuading (e.g. discourse strategies, indirect discourse, subjunctive, passive voice, speech acts)
- perceived and accurate cultural differences between the American and West German ads

The first question to be asked is: are consumers really that different in two countries as similar as the United States and West Germany, and are different approaches to these markets really necessary? Is it erroneous to assume that a successful ad in one language can simply be translated into the target language without making any substantial changes in the manner in which consumers are persuaded to purchase the item?

The answer, of course, differs according to the product and the type of customer one is attempting to communicate with. Certain products like Coca Cola lend themselves well to universal approaches with only minor local adaptions, since their customers tend to be younger and more globally oriented. Soft drinks also are not heavily culture-bound products. But although

the approach may be universal, the techniques must be carefully selected according to differences in language, culture, habits and social customs. Different people in different countries react differently to certain stimuli because of their tradition, national history, and ways of living. The elements of persuasion in an advertisement have to be recognizable in reference to the life experience of the target audience. Varying cultural aspects have to be examined carefully in order to determine which promotional appeals are best.

In order to sensitize my American students to the subtleties of the German culture as reflected in German TV commercials, I showed a series of German TV ads for a variety of products to a class of sixteen 3rd year Business German students. Because most students are untrained in critically viewing video materials, the following types of questions were provided ahead of time to guide them in their analysis: (1)

A. FRAME

- What is being advertised and for whom?
- Who is doing it?
- Is there a frame/structure to the ad?
  (e.g. opening, closing, story line, characters)
- Does the ad provide concrete information or merely an impression of a positive mood/feeling?

B. TECHNIQUES

- What function do the following elements play in the ads?
  . music
  . voice-over? (authority figure)
  . characters
  . sequence
  . mode (humorous / serious / scholarly / neighborly)
- Are those functions new to you? unusual? unexpected?
- What kind of techniques do you recognize from American television commercials?

C. STRUCTURE

- What percentage of time in the ad is devoted to providing information?
- What is the proportionate amount of time (or space) devoted to emotional or mood-building content?
- Does this differ between German and American TV ads?

- What type of emotional appeals are used?
- Which one seems to focus more on selling image and esteem, instead of providing information - the German or the American commercials?

D. SOCIAL ASPECTS

- How are relationships portrayed in German commercials?
  . within the family?
  . among friends?
  . between men and women?
- Does the portrayal differ from German to American ads?

- What seems to be of social importance in the German society as compared to American society?
  . Are there any social standards missing?
  . Are there any additional ones?

- What differences do you notice in
  . clothing?
  . food?
  . body-language?
  . others?

E. PERCEPTIONS

- What do you like the most about German commercials?
- What do you like the least?
  Do you find anything in the German commercials disturbing, strange, unpleasant?

The following comments were a result of the questionnaire:

(The group consisted of 16 students; a comment had to be made by at least three students in order to be listed. The commercials shown totaled three hours.)

German ads stress:

- durability
- dependability
- quality
- sophistication (German ads are not as silly as many American ads)

- tradition
- friendships

German ads show:

- nudity (the soap commercial (FA) for instance is almost alike, but the German version shows nudity)
- more sexuality
- more feelings in men
- strong family relationships

German ads emphasize:

- "nature" and "natural" products
- environmental concerns

German ads portray:

- mothers very traditionally (housekeeper and nurse)
- sons much more frequently than daughters

German ads seem:

- to have uglier women
- to have actors and actresses with bad teeth
- to be more trustworthy
- to carry more precise information
- to more readily promote foreign products

German ads are not:

- as fun/people oriented
- as beauty, youth, and health oriented
- stressing "the German way" (like Americans stress the "American way")
- do not stress that something is *new*, *improved*, and *changed* as much
- do not play catchy tunes (waltz in commercials seems inappropriate to Americans)
- do not show direct comparison as in the Pepsi-test commercial
- do not use as many words as American ads
- do not approach the customers as directly as the American ads; direct requests to buy something, such as
  . call now
  . act now
  . don't miss and so on
  are not common in German commercials

These comments proved to be an excellent starting point for discussing cultural differences, as well as various Marketing techniques and different impacts of legislation - (e.g. the

restrictions on comparative advertisement in the Federal Republic of Germany). Topics like the European Common Market and Germany's export market and export strategies can also be well implemented into this setting - e.g. different advertising attitudes toward foreign products).

The next step in analyzing German ads is oriented toward a more linguistic approach, that is intended to provide our students with an awareness of the pragmatic contrasts between American English and standard German. In order to provide a corpus for a comparative analysis between American and German ads, I researched magazine advertisements of the Ford car company of models selling in West Germany as well as in the United States. The linguistic analysis is pragmatically oriented, which means the syntactical and semantic elements shall be seen as acting with language, as linguistic behavior. Important is not only what is being said, but also how it is said, and how different types of discourse have different purposes. Certain linguistic symbols and their intended effects are directly connected to the different experiences that communicators have had with their contents during socialization. Social values are reflected in speech acts and vice versa.

In the following analysis of car ads, I intend to show how cultural differences are reflected in the language and the visuals of each ad. The comparison is based on advertising brochures for the Ford Fiesta (in West Germany) and the Ford Festiva (in the United States). Although not exactly the same car, the models are comparable and represent the same type of

vehicle looking almost identical. The findings of this particular comparative analysis typify my research on a whole line of ads of the Ford car company from the years 1988 and 1989.

Starting with the nonverbal aspects of the ads, both the Fiesta (Appendix 1), and the Festiva (Appendix 2) show up on the front page of the brochure in a flashy red color. On the first and second pages, the image of each car is conveyed nonverbally to the customer by showing the car with a palm tree, the flags of different countries, horseback riders on the beach, a skydiver, a hot air balloon, funky sunglasses, and an inviting tropical drink. The German ad sells the Fiesta with the image of vacation, fun, adventure, sport. In addition, the American Express card, perfume, a pair of red lips, and the sexual pose of a well dressed woman give the car another exclusive, elegant, and erotic touch. The verbal aspects of the German ad are fully in line with the semiotics. By means of the headline, the message is conveyed to the text *Wie man lebt, so fährt man* (How you drive is how you live). This slogan is synonymous with the lifestyle the car represents, with the purchase of the product itself. Buy our car, and you will be elegant, sexy, adventuresome, etc.. This impression is carried on in the main text: das Auto ... *soll ihre Lebenseinstellung, ihren Geschmack oder Stil zeigen*, it is not just a *Gebrauchsgegenstand* - (the car is supposed to show your view on life, your taste or style, it is not just a commodity). This car reflects the image of the owner. It is not just a car, but rather it is a statement about the owner's lifestyle as represented by the positive product

image. Although visually clearly tailored for the younger consumer, the ad chooses to approach a rather undefined crowd. *... paßt farblich zu fast jeder Garderobe, ... und im Prinzip auch zu jedem Geldbeutel* - (matches principally all income levels and its colors fit almost every wardrobe). The ad does not want to sell this car as a particular inexpensive product, since this would obviously interfere with its projected image.

The approach in the American Festiva ad is very different. Here, also, the headline sets the tone: *Defining Ford Fiesta*, and exactly that is happening. Relativly cut and dry, the text presents technical advantages, as well as economic efficiency. The picture, also, is rather static compared to the dynamics in the German ad. The Festiva literally stands by itself, with facts being the only message conveyed. No personal pronouns like *I* or *we* are used to personalize the message. The German ad, on the other hand, is much more communicative. The sender of the message is actually creating a communicative atmosphere, which seems to have the function of replacing the personal dialogue between a seller and a buyer. The German ad *talks* to the reader. Some of these discourse devices are:

- direct addressing (use of *Sie*)

e.g. statements such as: *Da stehen Sie auch lange Reisen durch ...* - (this way you will make it through long journays), *... schonen Sie die Umwelt* - (you protect the environment), run through the text continuously.

- direct questions, such as *Und sonst?* - (what else?), are given to the potential communication partner. This question

presupposes an interest on behalf of the potential buyer, and implies turn-taking as a discourse strategy. The actual information about the car is embedded in the German conversational type text.

The American ad selects an almost opposite approach to the German communicative style. The text stresses facts in an almost entirely monologue form. A direct approach occurs only once in connection with a direct request to buy: *Choose Festiva L ...* The German request, on the other hand, is suggesting the purchase with an indirect speech act, by addressing the issue of financing: *... können Sie Ihren Fiesta günstig ... finanzieren* - you can finance your Fiesta favorably), or a directly adressing question, which presupposes the purchase of the vehicle: *Wollen Sie lieber einen 5-, 4-, 3-, oder 2-Sitzer?* - (Would you rather have a 5-, 4-, 3-, or 2-seater?).

The use of a more indirect customer approach in all of the researched German car ads is rather interesting, compared to research done in 1980 by Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper, who compared native German and English speakers in 24 informal, everyday conversations in the directness levels of complaints and requests. Their findings show, that German speakers select 39% more direct requests than English speakers. (2) In persuasive speaking, this is obviously not so. The propositions expressed in the German ads are distant to the illocutionary point to which they refer, but clearly, the implicational relationships are discoverable to the potential buyer. In the

researched American ads, the illocutionary point is often more derivable from the semantic meaning. A possible reason for this phenomenon could be the rather formal level of conversation between the buyer and the seller. The sender of the message addresses the reader with a formal *Sie*, showing respect and politeness. Direct requests in German are much more likely found in informal conversation, where the conversation partners are of equal social status, or where one is in an authoritative position above the other. Therefore, direct requests do not seem to be appropriate for persuasive speaking in the German language, since it would disregard politeness and the level of respect.

Another important difference is the level of communication in the ads. The principal order of the German ad is built similarly to the devices of turn-taking in a conversation: the headlines *Und sonst?* - (What else?), *Was wollen Sie mehr?* - (What else would you like?), *Bitte Platz nehmen* - (Take a seat, please.), assume the function of regular turn-taking among conversation partners.

The American ad, on the other hand, is clearly a monologue: one fact follows the other, like a listing, no potential conversation partner can be found between the lines. Accordingly, the linguistic levels of the German ad utilize a lot of slang and coloquial language. The American Festiva, on the other hand, is represented in a rather official, technical language and manner. The semiotics underline the verbal impression. The German ad is continuously giving a lot of

nonverbal image in the icon, in addition and in relation to the product: romantic sight, erotic features - while the American ad focuses strictly on the product itself. A much more direct approach - verbally and nonverbally. The handwriting in the German brochure also underlines the intended personal relationship between seller and buyer. If we are asking ourselves why it seems so important in the German advertisement to establish an almost personal relationship between the seller and the potential buyer, we may find that it refers back to the overall German preference for small businesses, where people are known and recognized in a personal manner. Accordingly, people want to be *talked* to in the printed ads as well.

Another important difference can be seen in the use of personal pronouns. The senders of the message in the German ads personalize themselves by using personal pronouns, such as we, our etc.. This strategy is used in the American car ads as well, but much less frequently. On the one hand, this supports the dialogue style of the German ads, on the other hand, we may consider this phenomenon an opposite effect of formal addressing: the distance established in using formal *Sie* is countered not only by the senders identifying themselves as a communication partner, but also, by creating a group identification, using the prounoun *us* to identify buyer and seller as belonging to the same group.

Appendix 1

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Wie man lebt, so fährt man.

Das Auto ist für viele Menschen mehr als ein Gebrauchsgegenstand. Es soll ihre Lebenseinstellung, ihren Geschmack oder Stil zeigen. Es soll entweder zur Garderobe, in die Garage oder zum Geldbeutel passen. Der Fiesta paßt farblich zu fast jeder Garderobe, von Haus aus in jede herkömmliche Garage und im Prinzip auch zu dem Geldbeutel.

Aber das ist nur eine Seite der Medaille.

Obwohl der Fiesta schon auf den ersten Blick sehr kompakt wirkt, bietet er, von innen gesehen, doch eine ganze Menge Auto.

So erscheint das Attribut „großzügig" denn auch keineswegs als vermessen, hat man es sich in den ergonomisch geformten Sitzen erst einmal bequem gemacht. Da stehen Sie auch lange Reisen durch, ohne hinterher urlaubsreif zu sein.

Und sonst?

Bei den schadstoffarmen Benzinern und dem Diesel schonen Sie die Umwelt, sparen Steuern und fahren überhaupt sehr wirtschaftlich, da Verbrauch und Wartungskosten überaus günstig sind. Kurzum, der Fiesta ist in jeder Hinsicht die zeitgemäße Antwort auf Ihre Ansprüche. Weil Sie hier klein anfangen können, ohne sich deshalb bescheiden zu müssen.

Ansonsten können Sie Ihren Fiesta günstig über die Ford Credit Bank finanzieren oder leasen.

Was wollen Sie mehr?

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Appendix 2

FORD FESTIVA

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DEFINING FORD FESTIVA

Festiva is dedicated to the proposition that all small cars are *not* the same. Its smooth, aerodynamic shape and flared fenders carry the unmistakable mark of Ford styling. Its solid, wide stance, besides giving it road stability and balance, contributes to the Festiva hallmark: interior space efficiency.

FESTIVA ADVANTAGES

Front-wheel-drive Festiva is a great choice in a small car because it offers so much transportation for the dollar, as evidenced by its extensive standard equipment list.

And by its spaciousness. Festiva's interior roominess is truly surprising considering its trim exterior dimensions. An EPA interior volume index of 98.4 cubic feet makes Festiva roomier than many cars with larger exterior dimensions. Comfort is very much a part of the formula.

So is fun. Festiva's power front disc brakes, responsive suspension, overhead-cam 4-cylinder engine and manual overdrive transaxle make it a lot of fun to drive (an automatic transaxle is optional with L Plus and LX).

FESTIVA PRACTICALITY

Festiva also provides the small-car benefits that *are* expected. Due to its size and 4-cylinder powerplant, it gets excellent gas mileage (EPA estimates were not available at time of publication, see your Ford Dealer). And Festiva's excellent maneuverability and ease of parking make it a natural for urban and/or suburban use.

Choose Festiva L, L Plus or the substantially appointed LX and discover transportation value that doesn't look (or feel) the part.

An automatic transaxle is optional with L Plus and LX (LX shown). It includes multi-port electronic fuel injection for its 1.3 liter engine.

Right: Festiva combines the practical concerns of economy and comfort with a carefree attitude. Festiva LX is shown here in Brilliant Red.

Notes

(1) These questions were originally conducted in German.

(2) House, Juliane and Gabriele Kasper. "Politeness Markers in English and German." Conversational Routine.
Ed. Florian Coulmas
Den Haag: Mouton, 1980. 157-185.

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